CHURCH
February 12, 2006

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Psalm 30
1 Corinthians 1:1–4, 10–17

"Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ
that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you,
but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose.
1 Corinthians 1:10 (NRSV)

Our love and concern for the church are deeply connected to our love and concern for the world.
. . . The world, like the church, has experienced intense conflict.

In a world of divisiveness and violence, it is essential for those who confess Jesus Christ as Lord
to show the reason for the hope that is within us by dealing differently with one another.
The church has been called to a transformed way of living.
Today, especially, as Jews, Christians, and Muslims—the children of Abraham—
are as much enmeshed as any other people in ongoing conflict in our world,
our prayer to the God of Abraham is to hasten the day of messianic peace
and to enable the Presbyterian Church to be an instrument to that end.

The Report of the Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church
The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

O God, bless your church in every place this morning.
Bless this church, gathered to worship you,
dispersed to serve you by loving and serving our neighbors.
In the quiet of this time together, encourage us, strengthen us,
give us hope and love sufficient for our vocation—
to be your holy people, your church, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

If there was a debate in your household or with yourself this morning about whether or not to go to church, you need to know that you have already

done something very good for yourself today by being here. That is the conclusion reached, not by the minister who is always delighted to see people in church on Sunday morning, but by a professor of psychology at the University of Iowa, Susan Lutgendorf. Professor Lutgendorf conducted a study that concluded that weekly attendance at a religious service appears to have a lot to do with health and longevity. People who go to church are healthier and live longer. The study was reported recently in *Health Psychology*. The statistician who compiled the results said, "I didn't expect to find this. There's something involved in the act of religious attendance, whether it's the group interaction, the worldview, or just the exercise of getting of getting out of the house." Martin Marty, who celebrated his seventy-eighth birthday this month and who thinks "these are the best years—but there aren't as many left," says that having read this report, he plans to spend a lot of time in a church pew in the days ahead.

The topic this morning is church, this wonderful, sometimes exasperating, heroic, sometimes cowardly, profound, sometimes trivial, holy, always very human institution. It is not only good for your health apparently, it plays a fundamental role in Christian faith.

The church is what happens when the gospel, the good news of God's love in Jesus Christ, is proclaimed and believed. I sometimes think that no one was more surprised by the existence of the church than the man credited with starting it, the Apostle Paul. Saul was his real name. Several years after the life and ministry of Jesus, Saul became a believer, a Christian, became convinced that Jesus of Nazareth, a Jewish teacher and healer who was executed by the Romans, was, in fact, the Son of God, that God was fully in him and that after Jesus was crucified and died, he rose again and was powerfully present in the world and that in his life and death and resurrection, this Jesus was the living proof that there is a God and that God is love. Saul was so convinced that he had a hold of the most important bit of information in the history of the world that he changed his name to Paul and spent the rest of his life traveling around the Roman Empire telling about it. Nothing, it seemed, could convince him to stop. He stirred up trouble wherever he went with his news, his good news. He was kicked out of town after town, arrested, beaten, insulted, humiliated, finally sent off to Rome in chains and executed. But he never stopped talking, telling people about Jesus. And wherever he went, wherever people heard about Jesus—places whose names we know because of him, places like Ephesus, Thessalonica, Galatia, Corinth—the people who heard the good news and believed it were baptized. Paul himself baptized them with water, and together they became a strange new phenomena, a community. Because they knew now that God was love and therefore the holiest, most righteous thing they could do was not perform a sacrifice or follow a list of rules but love one another, they became important to one another. Sometimes, when

their communities turned against them and the ruling Romans began to consider them a nuisance and a threat to the common good, they were literally dependent on one another for their lives. And so they began to take care of one another. They cared for the widows and orphans and the poor in their number. They shared what they had. Weekly they held a meeting, at first on the eve of the Jewish Sabbath, later on the first day of the new week, the very day Jesus was raised from the dead. They met secretly in someone's home. They shared a common meal. They called it a love feast. It was the precursor to the church potluck. They prayed together. One of them read scripture and said a few words of encouragement. At the end they passed around a loaf of bread and cup of wine and recalled how Jesus had told his followers to remember him when they broke bread and drank wine together. Someone said a blessing. Everyone hugged and kissed and then, after dark, they left, one by one, as inconspicuously as possible, and returned to their homes. They began to call themselves by his name—Christians. And the Greek word they used to describe who they were was *ekklesia,* which we translate "church."

When you visit the site of ancient Corinth, which was a busy port city in Greece, one of the places Paul visited and preached and where a church happened, you can see the cobbled sidewalks and streets, the chariot and wagon ruts in the ancient stones, the marketplace, the foundation of stalls where food and spices and wine and cloth were bought and sold. You can see the foundation of the synagogue and the building next door where the church met after it wore out its welcome in the synagogue. And at the top of the marketplace, the Bema, the public platform, the podium where Roman officials appeared to address the population, the public pulpit, open to anyone who had an idea he wanted to share, a message he wanted to proclaim; the place where Paul, 2000 years ago, stood and first told the story of Jesus. The tour guide always invites the minister to go stand at the Bema, and so I did, and I will never forget, standing there under the hot Greek sun, imagining what happened there. I read, I think, that familiar and beautiful part of Paul's letter to those very people, the Corinthians, the thirteenth chapter: "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. . . . Love is patient; love is kind. . . . Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things!" Paul wrote those words to these people, people who lived there and walked and talked and loved and shopped and grew old and died there. It was quite a moment.

It was inspiring. But before he got to the love part, Paul, as a matter of fact, was a consummate realist about the church in Corinth, which was, frankly, at the moment driving him crazy. Built on the idea that the love of God had been expressed in Jesus, organized around the principle that their job, mission, purpose was to show that love to their neighbors by the way they lived and treated one another, that little church had become an

embarrassment. Those first Christians, who had heard Paul preach about love, started a fight, of all things. At first it was just a difference of opinion about something like what kind of prayers were said or hymns sung. They even fought over how much communion wine they should drink. And then it escalated, and people started dividing up into little groups, advocating their own positions in opposition to all the rest. There were liberals and conservatives, evangelicals and progressives. It was a real red state–blue state phenomena, and pretty soon they were saying nasty things about one another. "You're not a real Christian at all. You might think you are, but you're not. We are." And so those early Christians began what is perhaps our most enduring tradition: arguing and fighting with one another.

I love something author Annie Dillard wrote: "What a pity, that so hard on the heels of Christ come the Christians. There is no breather. The disciples turn into the early Christians between one rushed verse and another. What a dismaying pity, that here come the Christians already, flawed to the core. . . . Who can believe in the Christians?" (*Incarnation,* p. 36).

So Paul wrote a letter. It begins almost like a love letter: "To the church of God that is in Corinth. . . . I give thanks to my God always for you." And then he gets down to business.

> I appeal to you that there be no divisions among you.
> It has been reported to me that there are quarrels among you.
> Some of you are saying "I belong to Paul," or "I'm with Peter"
> and some are sure that they alone are on the side of Christ.
> Is Christ divided?

I probably should have read that from the Bema instead of the passage about love.

Flash forward twenty centuries. We're still at it, and sometimes I think nobody is better at fighting and arguing than we Presbyterians.

This is the day of our annual meeting, and we we're thinking about church today. So if you are not a member, or a Presbyterian, please bear with us as we think about who we are.

In some ways, the Presbyterian Church is the most American of all the denominations. We were here first. We were the majority in Colonial America. We helped establish independence, and our Calvinist ideas helped shape the Constitution. In our long history, we have fought and argued about the same issues the nation itself was arguing about. When the nation divided over the issue of slavery, so did we. When the nation discussed and argued about race, so did we. When the role of women in society became a topic of discussion and controversy in the nation, the church took it on as

well. And now, for the past twenty years, we have been arguing, very publicly, about issues of human sexuality, sexual orientation to be precise. The argument continues. On the one hand, there are many Presbyterians who conclude that scripture and Christian tradition regard same-sex relationships as sinful and forbidden and would restrict ordination to ministry and to office in the church to people who are either faithfully married or chaste in singleness. On the other hand, there are many Presbyterians who conclude that scripture and tradition mandate a more open and less restrictive policy and that there are other issues that are far more important when it comes to choosing leaders. Jesus never mentioned the topic, after all, but he did have a lot to say about justice for the poor and not excluding people and including everyone—particularly those who are excluded elsewhere in society. Both sides are convinced absolutely that theirs is the one, true, Godly position on this issue. Both sides have created organizations with budgets and staffs and newsletters and annual meetings. I helped organize one of them, the Covenant Network of Presbyterians, which advocates for a more open, inclusive Presbyterian church.

And so we have been arguing and voting on a variety of proposals to be less restrictive and more open, and every time we vote, we get angrier with one another until some are saying: Let's stop. Let's split the church, and each side can go its own way.

But now there is a unique opportunity. Several years ago the General Assembly created a task force to try to find a way to get us out of this mess without splitting the church. We called it the Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church, a phrase taken from the seventh ordination question ministers, elders, and deacons answer: "Do you promise to further the peace, unity, and purity of the church?" We assigned to the task force the widest possible diversity of people and opinions. John K. Wilkinson is one of its members. In the best Presbyterian style, we made sure that the task force was balanced in every category of age, gender, geography, race, and ideological, theological, and biblical position. That is to say, we created a body almost guaranteed to fail and spend all its time arguing.

A minor miracle has happened. The task force has come up with a report and list of recommendations that it unanimously approved. It identifies the issues that divide us. It acknowledges that conflict is the context in which we live in this world and in the church. It suggests that what everybody in the church is really good at is blaming other people for all our troubles. "It's the liberals—no it's the conservatives." And it makes the simplest and most remarkable suggestion: that we stop shouting and start listening, that we actually try to understand where the other person is coming from. The report says that we shouldn't divide the church although there are lots of days, in the midst of the incessant arguing, that it sounds like a viable

option. The report says we belong together because we are the church, the Body of Christ, and Christ, as Paul reminds us, is not divided.

On the most divisive issue, ordination, the report says that we ought to stop trying to change the rules, not easy for some of us to hear. And it proposes that we trust local congregations and local Presbyteries to decide how faithfully to apply the rules, not easy for others to hear.

It doesn't resolve the issue. Neither side gets what it wants. But it is a way for this small part of the holy catholic church to stop fighting and to refocus its energies on being the church, loving and serving the world and showing the world something of what the love of God looks like.

I can't think of anything more important than that. Christians and Jews, who ought to be the closest of brothers and sisters, are shouting at each other about Israel and Palestine. Catholics are arguing about Opus Dei and the *DaVinci Code.* Evangelicals are fighting about who's right and who's wrong on a whole catalog of issues of doctrine and practice and morality. Presbyterians and Episcopalians and Methodists and Lutherans are arguing about sex. All the while streets are full all over the world with Muslim demonstrators protesting the representation of the prophet Muhammad in a series of cartoons, although surely it is more than that. The world, the report says, is a divided place, a bloody, violent place where people die every day for reasons of political ideology and religious belief.

And almost invisible in the midst of that is the most important bit of good news the world has ever heard, namely that God is love, and the most important and promising and hopeful moral mandate, namely that God is properly worshiped, not when we are arguing and contending and winning battles of doctrine and practice and morality over our opponents, when we defend the prerogatives of our particular religion to the death—ours or, preferably, the other person's—but when we love one another, when something of God's love in Jesus Christ becomes visible in our life together.

Almost invisible—until you take a closer look at the church, a church like this one, and then you see in a thousand ways, most of them undramatic, quiet, inconspicuous, what the love of God looks like.

> See the hungry fed,
> the naked clothed,
> see the children welcomed and celebrated and nurtured
> and the elderly honored and cared for,
> see the sick visited, the dying comforted,
> see people who have little in common and may not even know one another
> or like one another, for that matter,

sitting together, confessing their flaws and failures together,
breaking bread and drinking wine together,
affirming their faith and hope—for the world and for themselves
together.

The church.

“I give thanks to my God always for you,” Paul wrote. So do I.

Amen.